

Numbers

Week 1

Monday: Numbers 5-7
Tuesday: Numbers 8-11
Wednesday: Numbers 12-15
Thursday: Numbers 15-19
Friday: Numbers 20-23

Introduction

Numbers: The Empire Strikes Back

You made it through Leviticus. Congratulations! This week, as we move into the book of Numbers, we rewind the tape a bit and overlap the last part of the story that ended in the middle of Exodus. Remember where we left off in Exodus 34. Moses had been up on the mountain with the presence of God, and while he was up there the people were at the base of the mountain building a golden calf to worship. Moses was angry, God was angry. Moses pleaded for the people's lives and God spared them. The story ended with Moses, the friend of God, radiating the Glory of the Lord while the people, rejecters of God, shied away in fear. Now that the Law has been given (Leviticus) we find ourselves at the beginning of Numbers with a completed Tabernacle, a sanctified priesthood, and a camp of 1,000,000+ people ready to move out.

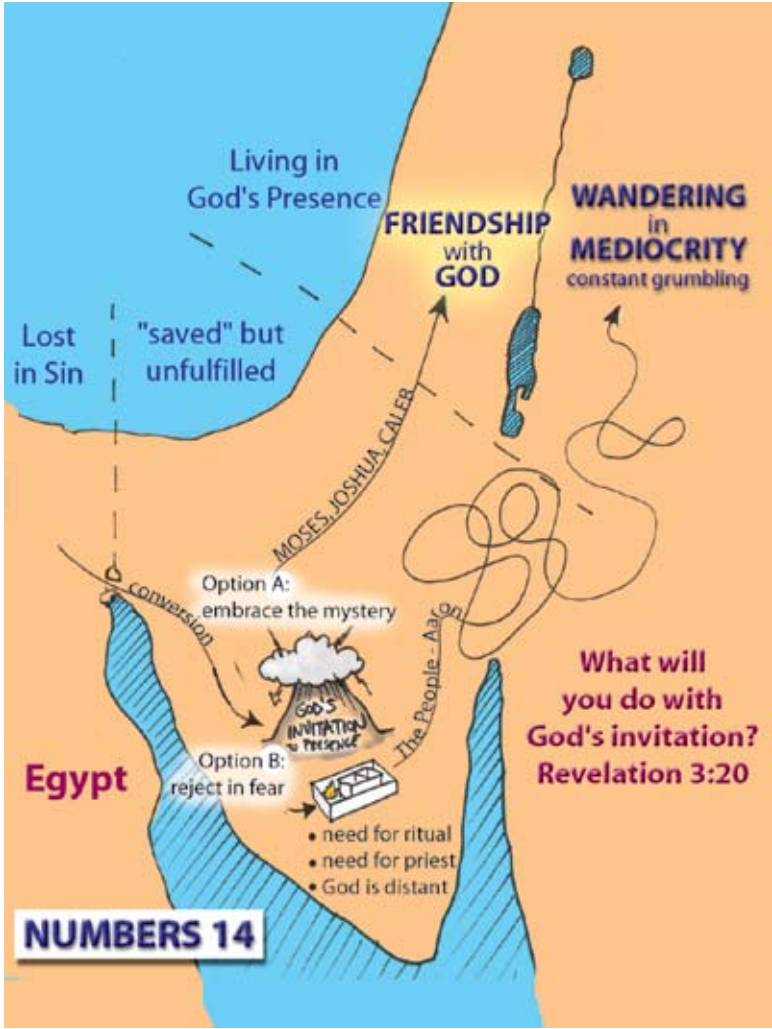
In many ways the book of Numbers can be thought of as the second story in a classic epic trilogy. Here's how the classic trilogy works. In episode 1 the good guys are the underdogs that are being oppressed by an evil regime. Through extraordinary acts of courage, and against all odds, the underdogs break free of the evil regime and celebrate a great victory. Then in episode 2 there is a tragic reversal. The newly formed band of underdogs faces internal

struggle, being threatened with implosion, while the recently defeated evil regime regroups and launches a counterattack to reclaim their losses and seek retribution. At the end of episode 2 things look bleak for the heroes and it seems that all may be lost. Then, in a grand climax, episode 3 shows a cleansing and resurgence of clarity, unity, and determination in the hero camp as they rally together to defeat the evil regime and establish true victory.

Sound familiar? For you science fiction fans you were probably thinking of the classic Star Wars trilogy of the 70's and 80's. In many ways the book of Exodus was episode 1 (or 4 for those who are technically aware!). The Israelites are miraculously delivered from the evil regime of Egypt and the darkness of sin and slavery. Unfortunately, Numbers is like the "Empire Strikes Back." It's not that Egypt came out after the Israelites. Actually there is a deeper and more sinister evil regime that was the master behind the puppet state of Egypt. The evil regime is Evil itself; it is the darkness of sin and isolation from God. It is the slavery of self-worship and bondage to sin.

In the book of Numbers we see the newly freed slaves move away from Mt. Sinai and head toward the Promised Land. As they move along the fabric of the community begins to unravel. In this story we will see envy and mutiny. We will see political scheming and self ambition threaten to destroy the people of God. In the end, a whole generation suffers for their sin. Be forewarned; while interspersed amongst the counting sections (which are tedious) there is an interesting and difficult story; it is a discouraging one because we see the people move from bad to worse. As you read this, pray that God would open your heart to hear what He wants to teach you through this story of defeat.

It is easy for us to sit in judgment over the Israelites and say, “how could they be so ignorant? How could they rebel against God when they saw his presence and experienced his miracles?” Rather than read in judgment, ask God to open your eyes to see how much we tend to behave just like them. May the reading of Numbers serve to be a time of cleansing and renewal in your heart as you glean from the negative example of the Israelites wandering through the wilderness, rebelling against God, yet being cared for through the whole process.



Monday: A Blessing

Numbers 6:22-27

What was the purpose of this section for the people of Israel?

Food for Thought:

Spend some time reading this blessing slowly. Read it out loud. Stop on each key word and ask yourself, "How is this aspect of God true or not true in my life right now?"

Bless -- to bless is the Hebrew word *barak* which means to bow before someone; to be for someone and not against. Do I feel like God is for me today?

Keep -- God is your guardian. He is the watcher and keeper of your life and your soul. Have you trusted yourself to God's protection, or are you trying to defend yourself?

His face -- Here is the key to the gospel, the good news, of the entire Bible. God is facing you. In the Old Testament the image of facing someone was an image of showing that person that you loved them and were interested in their well-being and in having a relationship with that person. Think about our human relationships. When you are fighting with your spouse, friend, child, or parent, the natural tendency is to turn away from them. When we are in good relationship we turn toward them, open our arms to them, and draw them into a loving embrace. God is facing you. His arms are wide open. Your salvation is at hand in the strong, protective, loving arms of your Heavenly Father. Are His arms around you today?

Gracious -- of course the concept of grace follows quickly on the tail of the image of God's loving embrace. That is because it is only on account of His graciousness that we can receive that

embrace. An embrace from a mutual friend is wonderful, but the authentic embrace of forgiveness in the arms of someone whom we have truly offended is infinitely more meaningful. When God embraces us it is not because we deserve it, but because He has extended forgiveness to us, has cleansed us from sin, and is willing to restore our broken relationship. Are you receiving God's grace in your life today, or are you allowing shame to stiff arm God?

Peace -- This is the final piece of the equation. When the strong arms of the father graciously embrace you, the result is peace. In that strong embrace nothing can harm you. You are not in conflict with God, you are not struggling with yourself, and you are safe from your enemies. This is peace, this is the Kingdom of God. Are you experiencing this peace today?

One more thought from this blessing. Many scholars see the Trinity present in this blessing. The Father is the strong protector. The Son is the means of Grace through which we have access to the embrace. The Spirit is the Spirit of peace through whom we experience the loving embrace and the daily walking in the Kingdom of God.

Now try saying this blessing to another person...and really meaning it. How does it change your outlook on that person?

May this meditation encourage your soul today.

Tuesday: What's at the Center

Numbers 9:15-23

Special note: In case you were confused by the bitter water test for adultery, see notes at the end of the devotional.

In Number 2 we learned how the camp of the Israelites was physically laid out. The 12 tribes of Israel surrounded the Tabernacle; 3 to the north, 3 to the south, 3 to the east, 3 to the west.

In this passage, what was the Tabernacle like?

What purpose did the Tabernacle play in the daily life of the nation?

How were the people supposed to respond to the activities of the Tabernacle?

Food for thought:

How did God lead His people in the desert? Did He sit down with Moses and map out a strategic plan for how they were going to systematically march on Canaan and take it over? No. God led His people with two fundamental principles. If we would simply follow these principles, much of the stress in our lives would be removed.

1. **Live principle centered lives.** God established the Law for His people so that the people could be whole and holy. It was a simple plan...obey and live. Admit that God has a much better plan for living than you do, give up trying to run your own life, and submit to the authority of scripture and the Holy Spirit which is at work in your life.

2. **Follow the cloud.** The first time this principle really came through clearly for me was when I read about it in Gordon MacDonald's book Ordering Your Private World. He talked about the difference between being *driven* and being *led*. A driven person has specific, tangible objectives that he has set and has attached his self-worth and significance in life contingent upon the completion of these goals. He is driven to accomplish these goals at all costs. A led person has yielded her life to the authority of God. She wakes up in the morning and says, "Lord, how may I serve you today? What are my orders?" This doesn't mean that she isn't organized or doesn't set goals and objectives for the plan of her week (that is a matter of personality type and time management issues). The difference between being driven and being led is one of the attitude of the heart.

In the book of Numbers the people of Israel did not know where they were going. None of them had ever been there before. They were trusting that

God had their best interest in mind, so they simply “followed the cloud.” As individuals, as families, and as a church, we need to continually check our hearts against these two principles. Are we submitting ourselves to the authority of God each day? Are we creating space in our lives, both individually and corporately, to clear out the clutter and distraction so that we can hear the voice of God and discern which direction the cloud is moving?

May we be a people that can see the cloud of God, discern where it is moving and, no matter where it goes or what the cost, may we have the courage to follow it.

Wednesday: Too Little, Too Late

Numbers 14

In vv. 1-4, why are the people so upset? (see 13:26-33)

What do the people want to do?

What is Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb's response?
(vv. 5-9)

What does God want to do to the people? (v. 12)

In what way does Moses intervene for the people?

What is the penalty for the people's rebellion? (vv. 26-35)

What is the people's response to God's judgment? (v. 40)

What happens to their plan? Why? (vv. 41-45)

Food for thought:

What does forgiveness mean? When discussing God's grace and forgiveness in light of God's Law and justice, there seem to be two camps in the Christian community that sit on opposite extremes of the continuum. On one side there is the camp that says that God is so loving and so forgiving that He will always forgive you no matter what you do and no matter how many times you do it. On the other side of the camp there are those who say that God cannot tolerate sin and that when you finally cross over the line for the final time, you cannot be forgiven.

Today's story in Numbers 14 sheds some light on the issue for us. The Israelites were complaining against God and were not willing to trust that God would actually deliver the promise that He had made. They saw the giants in Canaan and could not see how they could possibly defeat this formidable enemy. Their fear drove them to the point of even wanting to kill Moses and elect another leader to take them back to Egypt. This was a major sin of rebellion.

Here are some observations and application points from this story...

- Following God is a scary thing and the natural reaction is to run back to the familiar land of slavery and sinful patterns.
- God takes obedience to Him and trust in Him very seriously.
- There are consequences to sin and to rebelling against the name of God.
- God is a forgiving God, and will always forgive the repentant.
- Forgiveness does not remove consequences.

- When we move on without the blessing of God, we will always fail.

Let's camp on that phrase, "forgiveness does not remove consequences." God forgave the rebellious generation. He continued to lead them through the wilderness for another 40 years. His presence went before them and He provided the food they needed every single day. They had a relationship with Him, but He did not allow them into the Promised Land.

This is a truth pill that is very hard for us to swallow. There are consequences to our actions that will have a lasting effect on our lives. If you take drugs you will damage your body, permanently. If you drink and drive, you may kill an innocent person and they will never come back. If you get a divorce your children will be emotionally scarred for the rest of their lives. If you lie you will tarnish your trustworthiness and will have to work very hard to build back trust.

Does God forgive drug addicts, drunk drivers, divorcees, and liars? Absolutely. If we truly repent and ask for forgiveness then He has promised that He will remove the guilt of that sin from us as far as the east is from the west. Will He remove the consequences? No. Will a person who has had an affair, divorced their spouse, remarried, and is living in a blended family situation ever be able to experience the wholeness of a united and sanctified family? No. They will not get to enter into the Promised Land of the blessing of family that God intended for them. Does that mean that they cannot know God or follow Him? No. It just means that they cannot pretend that they are "all better" now that they are forgiven. There are deep wounds of relational devastation that will carry on throughout the generations because of those actions. God can

heal those wounds and work with those wounds to make strong scar tissue, but the scars will never go away.

Here's the point. Be careful to not fall into the trap of thinking, "I'm going to commit this sin, even though I know it's wrong, because I know that God will forgive me afterward." That is dangerous thinking. When we do that we will be like the Israelites who said, "Oh, Lord, we're sorry for rebelling, we want to go fight now." Moses said, "I'm sorry, that's too little, too late. God will not be with you in that endeavor."

This is a heavy devotional, and perhaps a controversial one. Yet, it is important for us, as followers of Jesus, to never take lightly the instructions that we have been given. God loves us so much and has such rich blessings in store for us, that it would be foolish for us to flirt around with sin and miss out on the good stuff. We just don't have time for that. Let's keep our eyes focused on Jesus and keep loving each other with God's kind of love.

Thursday: Mutiny!

Numbers 16-17

What accusation was brought against Moses and Aaron?

How did Moses and Aaron respond to this accusation?

How did God respond to this accusation?

Food for thought:

Following God in obedience is a difficult task. Here is a harsh truth that would serve us all well to remember: when you step out in faith and follow what you feel God is asking you to do, you will almost always be misunderstood by the crowd around you. Jesus told us that in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. He said, *“Blessed are you when men insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

So, how should we react when we are misunderstood, falsely accused, and abused? Our natural tendency is to slip into the “fight or flight” instinct and protect ourselves. Depending on the circumstances and our personality we may either retaliate with a “holier-than-thou” explanation about how WE are actually obeying God while THEY are apathetic sideliners. Or we may shut down and remove ourselves emotionally from the relationship in order to protect ourselves from the pain. We may become bitter and resentful towards those people. Or, we may even begin to resent God for allowing this persecution when we have sacrificed so much to do what He asked us to do.

So how should we react? We can learn a great lesson from how Moses and Aaron reacted...

1. They fell on their faces. To fall on one’s face, in those days, was to place oneself in a position of humble submission to another. Here Moses and Aaron were the God anointed spiritual and political leaders of the people who were being accused by the “peasantry.” In human standards Moses and Aaron had every right to flex their leadership muscles

(which had been given to them by God, remember) and push this rabble back into their places. But they didn't. Instead, they humbled themselves before the people and acknowledged that God alone was the leader and that they were merely vessels. In a sense, they were acknowledging to their accusers that there may be some truth in the accusation and that they were willing to entertain the idea.

2. They left the battle up to God. Moses and Aaron knew this simple truth: if something is ordained by God, then it is going to happen. If it is not of God, then it won't. Here is the trap that many leaders fall into. We start off by following along with God's direction. In the beginning we see that it is God at work and that we are just vessels. Eventually, though, we can start to take the credit for the things that God is doing, as if it was our cleverness and strategizing that made this thing work. Then, we begin to attach our identity to the successfulness of the ministry that we are leading and become dependent upon its success to feel good about ourselves. At that point, if our leadership is challenged, or we are misunderstood, or accused of wrong-doing, we feel personally attacked and our own sense of self-worth and identity is at stake. With those lenses on it becomes very easy to start fighting back against our assailants.

Moses and Aaron believed that God had appointed them to be the leaders. If this accusation was true, and God was now ready to remove them from leadership, then there was nothing they could do about it. If this accusation was false, then God would make it clear to everyone who He wanted to be the leaders and who he didn't.

3. If we leave it up to Him to fight the battles, then He will make truth clear in the end. In the end of this story the rabble-rousers were swallowed up by the Earth. That is not generally how God does it any more when we are falsely accused. However, if we step out of the way and let our accusers run their course, they will eventually be swallowed up by their own selfish and sinful motives and desires and be exposed for who they really are.

So, the next time you are misunderstood or falsely accused, take a deep breath and ...

1. ask yourself, "Is there any truth in what these accusers are saying?" If yes, then thank them for exposing a blind spot in your life and repent of it.
2. If no, then turn the other cheek to them and allow God to defend you. You just stick to the agenda that God has given you and don't let nay-sayers and rabble-rousers set your agenda for you.
3. Remember that this is God's agenda and not yours. If at anytime God wants to give you new marching orders, then so be it. You are just along for the ride! All glory belongs to Him anyway.

Friday: Honor

Numbers 20:1-13

What was the complaint of the people this time?

What was God's instruction to Moses and Aaron?

What did Moses do?

What was the consequence for Moses' action?

Food for thought:

Wow, this is a harsh passage! How could God come down so hard on Moses for a simple thing like hitting a rock? After all, Moses had just spent 40 years listening to these people do nothing but whine and complain. A lesser man would have snapped long before Moses did. How could God have denied Moses the pleasure of entering in the Promised Land that he had worked so hard to reach?

There are a few lessons in this passage:

1. Moses sin was not that of hitting the rock. His sin was in the fact that he did not honor God as holy in the sight of the people. God's instructions to Moses were to speak to the rock and it would gush forth water. (note: This was probably a natural spring that was dried up at the time). Notice what Moses did.

First he said, "listen you rebels". He had finally slipped into the vengeful place where he began to hate the people. Up until this point it was Moses that was interceding on behalf of the people to stave off God's wrath. Now Moses was burning with wrath against the people. He began to buy into the idea that this was really all about him.

Secondly, he said, "must *we* bring water out of this rock." Whoa! Who's going to bring the water out of the rock? Moses started believing his own press. Moses was going to take the credit for the miracle that God was about to perform. In so doing, Moses had dishonored God by stealing His glory and making this a personal issue between Moses and the people.

As a leader, it was Moses' job to stay transparent and allow the people to see the true picture of God through him. To "honor God as holy" is translated "sanctify," and "set apart" God in other translations. It is the verb form of the word *kadosh* which means to "be set apart". As soon as a leader does not point the glory to God and begins taking credit for God's work, his ministry is over.

2. Sin is sin and consequences are consequences, no matter who you are. In this final act of judgment, God drove home the point to the people that, if Moses could suffer consequences because of sin, then sin must be serious business. It is a strong temptation for leaders of any level to begin believing that they are above the law; that the rules don't apply to them. We must remember this: in the kingdom of God the gift of leadership is just another one of the many gifts. We are all members of the body of Christ and there is only one head, Jesus Christ. The human leader in the church is an important role, but it is not one that is elevated above any others. That is why Jesus told His disciples that if they wanted to be great in the kingdom of Heaven then they must become least. A leader is the chief servant. As soon as a leader in the church begins to buy into the aristocratic models of leadership upheld in the world's systems, then they are done for. The Promised Land of walking in the Kingdom of Heaven in the fullness of truth and unity with God and His people will be out of reach.
3. God will accomplish His purposes with or without us. For every Moses there is a Joshua who is in the wings to fill in the gaps. It is a danger to believe that one individual is indispensable to the accomplishment of God's mission in any given

circumstance. Many times we can take on too much responsibility for the health and stability of whatever ministry we are leading, whether it be our family, our relational evangelism in our workplace, our church, etc. Yes, God expects faithfulness and diligence in whatever assignment He has given us, but when we take on the load of believing that we are absolutely necessary to the success of the ministry, then we have slipped into dangerous territory. God wants us to experience the joy of serving Him well, but He will not allow us to take the glory and the credit for the work that He is doing. You can be replaced, don't forget that.

The last two days of devotionals have been pretty heavy handed, that is true. Don't be discouraged, though. The truth about these heavy devotionals is that, when they are fully realized in your heart, they will bring the most ultimate sense of peace and fulfillment possible. Here's why...God is in control, not you. God loves you and wants you to experience the fullness of knowing Him. When we get out of His way and admit that we aren't smart enough or strong enough to "do" what He wants us to do, but that if we yield ourselves to His strength and "be" available to Him, then we will experience unthinkable joy in serving our King.